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Effects of Land Privatization on People's Livelihoods, Case Study of the Mapuche in Chile

Chile has currently over 15 million inhabitants, out of which around 604.000 – 83,3% of the total number of indigenous people – are Mapuche. A large number of this indigenous people live under poor or inadequate livelihood conditions which might be connected to a legislative process which, from a historical point of view, resulted in the delegitimization of the foundations of the collective property rights over land and, thus, the abolition of the status of sovereignty that the Mapuche enjoyed in the past.

Thus, for the case of this research, the hypothesis is that the processes involved in the privatization of land in Chile, since the colonial period, has in general not contributed to the sustainability of the livelihoods of the Mapuche; on the contrary, it has been a negative force that has in most of the cases only increased their poverty. Baring this in mind, the specific objectives of this study are, first, to identify and analyze the effects of privatization on people's livelihood, with special focus on the Mapuche in Chile since the beginning of the colonization; and second, to provide valid arguments in favour of and/or against the processes involved in privatization, in order to avoid this kind of conflicts in the future in Chile and in other countries of the world, particularly in those were the establishment of this type of system is currently being carried out. Within the theoretical framework, the integration of three theories or conceptual frames was considered to be essential as they provide a solid philosophical and practical base for the analysis of the information and formulation of the arguments involved; these are the General Systems Theory, Sustainable Livelihoods, and Social Capital; all which are brought together in a contextualized conceptual framework which provides the practical base for the performance of the analysis, discussion, and recommendations.

Some key findings of this research are; first, privatization, in the context of a society, may operate as a perturbation in the development of the systems which constitute the society as a whole. In the case of the Mapuche, this perturbation seems to be linked to the erosion of the very base of the systems the Mapuche once had and participated in; that is, their traditional structures. Thus, however true that private property in the context of a formal network, might be one of the most relevant tools for the promotion of the sustainable development of people's livelihoods; one must be very careful when carrying out privatization, particularly of land, as systemic diseases in the shape of, for example, cultural lost or erosion, lost of social cohesion (or excessive individualization), lost of traditional structures and transformation processes, social exclusion (political, economic, and of social participation), poverty, and inequality, may arise. Second; it is urgent, on the part of the State, to redefine the policies that have been applied to the indigenous lands till now. These policies are often ineffective and contradictory. And third; although in a country like Chile, where the concept of private property is rooted so deeply, environmentally, economically and sociologically, going back to the traditional systems of land tenure is not advisable and, actually, not even possible; it is clear that privatization, as it is currently being carried out in other countries basically due to intents of duplicating the behaviours of the "western world", needs to be carefully and constantly evaluated and, perhaps, even avoided, in order to elude undesirable situations as the one in Chile.

Key words: Land privatization, land tenure, Mapuche, sustainability, livelihoods, General Systems Theory, systemic diseases, Chile.